

## **The Beijing Olympics and China’s National Image Building**

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China’s greatest strategic threat today is its national image. The country’s most important strategic challenges as diverse as sustaining economic growth and the Tibet issue, have at their root a shared connection to China’s national image. Even the leadership’s desire to maintain internal stability has ties to how the country is seen and how she sees herself. And China is determined to turn the Beijing Olympics into the celebration of a Chinese renaissance and the harmonization of world civilizations under the theme slogan ‘One World, One Dream’ .

The Beijing Olympics, nevertheless, has been subject to a great test hinging upon China’s balanced policies in dealing with several major contradictions--between encouraging nationalist pride to enhance internal cohesion and fostering the harmonization of different civilizations for the purpose of external resonance, and between containing the Tibetan independence movement and promoting greater national reconciliation. And a preferable China’s national image will depend not only upon whether Beijing will stage the 2008 Games as an extravagant festival in the Olympic spotlight but also, more importantly, upon how well China will conduct balanced policies in these areas against its socio-political background.

An examination of the political dynamics of the Beijing Olympics may enrich our knowledge about China’s national image building. My main argument is that the Beijing Olympiad marks a watershed in China’s renewed efforts toward a modernized, unified, and internationalized nation in the global community and is bound to set a new impetus for China’s continued modernization drive. The discussion that follows consists of three main sections. The first section will provide a brief review of conventional perspectives on China’s national image building in terms of hosting the Olympiad. The second section will examine China’s

daunting challenges in the context of the Beijing Olympiad. The third section is to shed light on the steps that could help Beijing accelerate the process of bringing images of China's continued modernization drive beyond the 2008 Games.

## **1. The Olympiad as China's National Image Building Strategy**

There is little dispute that power in the international arena is derived, in part, from a nation's ability to project an image that presents its military, economic, political, or cultural importance in a favorable or powerful light. And whether one calls them mega-events or global media events, hosting Beijing Olympics is one of several strategies used by the Chinese governments for image enhancement on a global stage. Beijing seeks to be coupled with the positive image associations that the Olympic Games enjoy. Whatever the economic and political reasoning may be behind an Olympic bid, Beijing's immediate goal is to produce a successful sports and cultural spectacle that will garner favorable media coverage worldwide. This perspective explains China's image-building efforts in some situations.

Political scientists find that when a country enjoys international respect and prestige, it helps the national leaders convince their domestic audience of their legitimacy. And Beijing is no exception. The reason why Beijing cares about the images of China is to be found in the external material rewards good images may generate and the external material punishments bad images are likely to bring. As the image of China as a totalitarian state created additional international problems for China's policy of national re-unification, China badly needed to improve its national images in order to reduce the obstacles to its international political and economic objectives. And some of China's projected images can become internalized self-images, which in turn have a constitutive effect on China's foreign policy.

Communications scholars also have long regarded image politics as central to the conduct of international relations. Concepts such as strategic public communication, national image building, and media diplomacy have been used to refer to the purposeful enhancement of a nation's image as a tool of foreign policy. And Beijing has realized that the Olympiad is a powerful instrument for state legitimization and national cohesion. But, this is no easy task, finding an effective framework capable of building a favorable national image: the world's view of China is too often an unstable cocktail of out-of-date ideas, unshakeable prejudices and fears. And Chinese who pin their hopes on the Beijing Olympics to remake the nation's image are similarly making a miscalculation. And the Beijing's

Olympics can only impact China's image if there is a framework for people to fit that image into.

## **2. The Challenges for China's National Image Building in the Context of the Beijing Olympics**

The Beijing Games are largely celebrated as China's global coming-out party, a chance to showcase its remarkable economic strides and to claim its place as a 21st-century world power. International attention will be focused on China, and many human-rights activists hoped that China's eagerness to shine in the spotlight would prompt its Communist Party leaders to provide a modest opening for political liberalization. But mega-events alone can not help China out of the numerous problems associated with internal and external behaviors that are out of step with global norms. And the Olympic spotlight also discloses some fundamental challenges that confront China, whose legitimacy is at stake in successfully hosting the 2008 Olympic Games.

Firstly, some of the organizations and activists that make up international civil society pose a management challenge for Beijing. Well-funded US-based coalitions and celebrity activists, such as those focused on Darfur, human rights and other issues, have achieved some success in influencing China's foreign and domestic policy behavior as China has adjusted its long-standing foreign policy principle of non-interference in other nations' internal affairs, in part because of international NGO and foreign government advocacy efforts. As the Olympics approach, NGOs will likely increase the volume and frequency of their activities, posing particular risks for Beijing and organizations associated with the event. If Beijing responds with force or in an overly heavy-handed way to demonstrations, otherwise minor incidents could generate significant media attention. It's an open question as to how much Beijing thinks it can afford the pro-Tibet and anti-China demonstrations.

Secondly, Beijing faces serious challenges to coordinate corruption prevention work in government institutions and in civil society. Recent years witnessed China's image tarnished by corrupt officials who used their positions to amass wealth and aid mistresses. And runaway corruption in China will undermine critical governing institutions, fuel public resentment, exacerbate socioeconomic inequality, create massive economic distortions, and magnify the risks of full-blown crises. If China's new laws and regulations clarify the roles of different organizations in preventing corruption, a network can be formed in China with no overlapping functions, which will promote institutions supporting civil society safeguards. It is expected that Beijing's Olympics should give

China a fresh opportunity to resuscitate its fight against corruption, and only a strategy that empowers the media and civic groups to keep government officials honest will increase the chance of success.

Thirdly, for Beijing, part of the image strategy is to overcome certain stereotypes commonly associated with China and the Chinese people as well. This is no easy task as most types of media—especially sports media—tend toward an over-reliance on stereotypes to efficiently get their points across in a way that is familiar to home audiences. The topics and themes were selected more for their relevance to Western audiences than to be most representative of Chinese culture. And a poor China's national image has the effect of accelerating misunderstandings, clouding a clear appreciation of China's national interest with dangerous prejudices. However, Beijing must rely upon the whims and ways of a largely independent, global media network to project its desired image around the world. While being concerned about maintaining social stability and projecting a positive image associated with the Games, Beijing will face risks from negative media portrayals and activists with specific agendas.

Fourthly, the biggest challenge in orientation in handling the question of China's national image is the shift from a "broadcast" model in which China tries to tell the world what to think to a model that recognizes that, ultimately, the decision about what China's image means will be decided by the world at large. This means replacing top-down approaches to message management with a broader-based approach that offers many pathways into understanding China. It also requires Beijing create a system that talks frankly about every element of Chinese cultural, political and economic life, that lets foreigners find their own path to an understanding of China, through the good and bad of the country. And in an interconnected world, China still must rely on the good will of a global marketplace of ideas and goods. That good will, in turn, rests on how well China is understood. But whether the international media will spotlight the Games forgivingly is still unclear.

### **3. The Beijing Olympiad as the Platform of Multicultural Communication**

There have been many signs that Beijing is ready for a rebirth of its national image in the run-up to the Olympic Games. But to achieve the promise of a favorable national image, there are legacies—institutional as well as psychological—that need to be shed. This paper is a brief presentation of the implication of hosting Beijing Olympics for building a favorable image in contemporary China. A comprehensive set of suggestions for mitigating both domestic and international challenges is beyond its current scope. Nevertheless, the foregoing analysis warrants

a few practical steps that could help accelerate the process of China's national images building.

The first, important step is to make a decision that China's constant newness is the most useful framework for national image building. For Beijing, this suggests a constant effort to project images of new China and avoid turning to old clichés about the country. In this perspective, every event in China's national life is an opportunity to communicate about China, whether the events are seen as "good" or "bad" outside of China. While Beijing's plan to build out Confucius Institutes is a first gesture at public diplomacy, it is important that these sites represent new, innovative China and not simply the millennia's-old culture generally associated with the name on the door. This is not only because "old China" ideas undermine the urgency of making people see China with new eyes, but also because a relentless government focuses on old China when the world has constant evidence of the country's newness further undermines China's trustworthiness.

Secondly, Beijing must carefully channel hyper-nationalistic sentiments into a good manner of sportsmanship, while people's patriotism stimulated by the Beijing Olympics may be good for national unity. And the Olympics should make Beijing to channel the expression of popular nationalism in a civilized way at the time when its legitimacy is so attached to nationalism but the goal of its hosting policy is to promote harmonization between China and the rest of the world. The distinction between average Chinese sports fans and ardent nationalists might become difficult to distinguish as the differences between athletic triumph and China's status as an emerging superpower become blurred. But nationalistic sports fans can potentially engage in unsavory behavior, such as poor sportsmanship and flag burning, that can sully China's reputation. Therefore, apart from building up policing at sports events, it is also essential at this point what else Beijing will do to contain any future expressions of hyper nationalism.

Thirdly, Beijing has to create a culturally interactive framework that will put new demands on China's public diplomacy. Beijing needs to find ways to let the intellectual, cultural and commercial products of a fresh and emerging China complement and strengthen China's traditional image. Beijing must also find ways to let China's NGOs make their way into the arena of international image projection. Moreover, the values China talks about in its innovative strategic vision should also be captured by those who represent the brand overseas: bright young thinkers, ethnic minorities, artists and writers should all be brought to the surface as a way of showing some of the vibrant tensions in modern Chinese life. They

should be encouraged to speak honestly and personally about life in China, about, for example, how they balance in their own minds the demands of stability and freedom. For China and foreigners, such an approach will help dissolve the “us-them”, “socialism-capitalism” sorts of simplifications that make clear communication difficult.

Lastly, but not the least, Beijing must ensure transparency on the developments and events in Tibet and other regions of China. It is the only way for China to regain the trust of the general public the world over, as we live in an era in which the advancement of human understanding cannot operate effectively without the broadest possible dissemination of knowledge. It has thus required the CPC officials to follow the trend of openness, to lay down their psychological defense against foreign media and to get used to the international norms and standards of media management, which requests government and Party leaders at all levels hone their news sense and improve media communication skills. And the massive Sichuan earthquake also gauges Beijing’s commitment to transparency with regard to the scale and scope of the quake’s impact. The Chinese government’s rapid, full-throttle rescue and the unprecedented flow of news it has allowed have enabled ordinary Chinese and foreigners as well to share in the immense tragedy.

#### **4. Conclusions**

While Beijing’s Olympic Games will greatly promote reconstructing the value system of Chinese civilization and projecting the image of cultural China so as to reshape China’s international environment into one of enduring harmony, it has also challenged Beijing to carefully handle some intractable contradictions in the process of modernization, particularly with regard to China’s harmonious society progress. And with growing international economic and political clout, Beijing will also confront myriad issues that are not directly related to the 2008 Olympics. To be sure, international concerns about China’s product safety, trade surplus, assertive foreign policy, and growing eagerness among activists of all political persuasions to capitalize on the international attention present significant risks to the Chinese government, the resonance of the Beijing Olympics’ themes with the renewed state policy of the ‘scientific and sustainable pursuit’ of China’s development highlights Beijing’s redoubled efforts to redefine China’s political identity in line with traditional and universal values of greater appeal, and provides a first-cut consideration of these problems. And until China makes remarkable progresses in terms of its social and political life and becomes a more trusted nation, a favorable national image building is still a difficult task for Beijing in the days ahead.

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